

Independent Study

Freedom and Flourishing in Social and Political Thought

Dr. Angel Adams Parham
3 Credits
Spring 2024

Course Description

At the foundation of many of the debates in social and political theory are questions about freedom and flourishing. Writers from the time of Plato and Socrates have asked what is the nature of the good life, what constitutes human flourishing? The founders of sociology, while not posing the question in quite this way, were also undeniably animated by similar questions. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim questioned what societal arrangements were and were not conducive to human flourishing. We certainly see this in Marx's concerns about alienation, Weber's warnings about the potential dangers of rationalization, and Durkheim's writings on solidarity and anomie.

The question of freedom is closely related to that of flourishing. From Plato's reflections on the metaphorical prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave, to contemporary questions about the nature of structure and agency, social and political theorists have considered how free we really are to determine the shape of our own lives. In this independent study we will read social and political theorists from antiquity to the present in order to better understand the roots of contemporary thought on questions of freedom and flourishing.

Course Requirements

This is a small group independent study which requires in-depth reading and discussion. Participants are expected to do the following:

- Submit a written reflection on the readings the evening before we meet. Weekly reflections should be 3-4 pages in length and provide insight and questions that form part of our conversation. Because the readings are arranged chronologically and designed to be in conversation with each other, participant reflections are expected to draw out ties between the readings. That is to say, reflections are more than simply summaries of the reading, they comment on the development of the ideas of freedom and flourishing over the centuries.
- Submit a final written meditation on the concepts of freedom and flourishing in political and social thought which provides their own contribution to the centuries-long conversation on these topics. This meditation will demonstrate fluency in the ideas and texts we have studied this semester and will be 8-10 pages in length.

ALL meetings are on Fridays, 9:00-11:00am unless otherwise noted

Weeks 1-3

Ancient and Medieval Foundations of Freedom and Flourishing

January 19

- Adler, Overview essays on “Happiness” and “Liberty”
- Plato, *The Republic*, “Allegory of the Cave”
- Socrates, *Phaedrus*, “On the Nature of the Soul: The Figure of the Charioteer”

February 2

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1 all, Book 8, on friendship, parts 1-4, Book IX, part 9-10

SATURDAY—*February 10, 10am-12pm.*

- Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VI
- Dante, sections from *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*

Weeks 4-7

Late 16th through 18th Century—Questioning the Foundations: Moving Toward “Enlightenment”

February 23

- Michel de Montaigne, Ch. 18 “That Men are Not to Judge of Our Happiness Til After Death”; Ch. 19 “That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die”
- Renee Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, entire

TUESDAY, *February 27, 7:00-9:00pm*

- Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”
- Immanuel Kant, “On National Characters”, from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*

March 1

- Goethe, *Faust*, Prologue in Heaven, and Part I

March 8

- Declaration of Independence
- Phillis Wheatley, selected poem on freedom, Letter exchange with George Washington
- Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson, letter exchange on freedom for African Americans
- May Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”

(Weeks 8-10)

19th to Early 20th Century, Breaking Free in Order to Flourish: Rise of the “Self”

March 29

- Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own”
- Watch, “Madame Bovary”

April 5

- Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue”, from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
- Henry David Thoreau, “Economy” from *Walden*

April 19

- Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation”
- Emile Durkheim, Chapter II “The Determination of Moral Facts” in *Sociology and Philosophy* (trans D.F. Pocock)

Weeks 11-13

20th Century to the Present: Reflections on Structure, Agency, Power and Flourishing

April 26

- Sigmund Freud, Chapters 1-2, *Civilization and its Discontents*
- Joan Didion, “Slouching Toward Bethlehem”

May 3

- C. Wright Mills, “The Promise” from *The Sociological Imagination*
- Michel Foucault, “Power/Knowledge”

May 6

- Iris Marion Young, Introduction, Ch. 2 “Five Faces of Oppression”, Ch. 8 “City Life and Difference” in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*
- Philip Rieff, “Introductory” in *Triumph of the Therapeutic*

Final Meeting—TBD, via Zoom

Wrap-Up Discussion